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High levels seen in vegetable grown with local tainted water

By ANDREW SILVA
Staff Writer

Friday, December 20, 2002 - Test results on lettuce grown with contaminated water from Redlands more than four years ago showed high levels of a rocket-fuel ingredient, though government studies on how perchlorate accumulates in food have not been released.

The test results from 1998 are included in the 6-year-old lawsuit filed by about 800 residents of Mentone and Redlands.

The suit alleges perchlorate and industrial cleaning solvents dumped on the ground by aerospace giant Lockheed Martin at its former rocket fuel plant in Mentone are responsible for the residents' illnesses, including cancers.

Documents included in the lawsuit, which show the test results on lettuce from Lucky Farms and a letter from Lockheed's attorneys, were posted by the Oakland-based Environmental Working Group on its Web site, www.ewg.org, Friday.

An analysis by the environmental group suggests vegetables accumulate perchlorate at levels higher than in water and could expose people to far greater doses than the interim recommendations by state and federal regulators.

It also raises concerns about lettuce and other vegetables grown in the Imperial Valley, which relies heavily on Colorado River water. The river is also contaminated by perchlorate.

Perchlorate reduces thyroid function. Regulators worry that even low doses could pose a serious threat to the development of fetuses, infants and pregnant women. There is no enforceable standard for perchlorate in drinking water, though the state will establish one in 2004.

But government studies on how plants accumulate the chemical have not been published.

"We've been worried about this for far too long," said Kevin Mayer of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "I realize how bad it sounds that we haven't followed up on this."

At an October perchlorate conference in Ontario, Mayer said he asked Air Force officials about the status of studies related to food and perchlorate but didn't get a satisfactory answer.

"We thought we had a commitment from the Defense Department," Mayer said.

The 1998 test results on Lucky Farms lettuce were presented to Lockheed when they were finished, and Lockheed offered to pay for additional work, but there was no approved method for testing for perchlorate in food, said Gail Rymer, spokeswoman for Lockheed.

"If there's no standard method, you don't know what you have," Rymer said.

Perchlorate is a salt that dissolves easily in water. Basic plant biology says that salts can accumulate in plants because they take in the water, and as the plant uses some water and some evaporates, it leaves the salt behind, Mayer said.

In Redlands, a plume of perchlorate-tainted groundwater has been migrating west from Lockheed's former rocket fuel plant and covers 10 square miles. From north Rialto, another plume has spread more than six miles to the southeast, affecting 22 wells in Rialto, Fontana and Colton.

The north Rialto plume is thought to have originated from near the county-owned Mid-Valley Landfill.

In another perchlorate development Friday, the Santa Ana Regional Water Control Board issued a tentative cleanup order to the county for the contamination near the landfill.

County officials have already spent about \$1.5 million investigating perchlorate around the landfill.

The cleanup order, if approved by the regional water board at its Jan. 17 meeting, would require further investigation and then development of a plan for removing the contaminant from the groundwater.

The county was expecting the order and plans to continue to work closely with the water board and the affected water agencies to find a solution, county spokesman David Wert said.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., on Thursday said she would push for more federal money to help with the investigation and cleanup of perchlorate-contaminated water.